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THE ROUND TABLE

WHAT THE GRADUATES OF OUR HIGH SCHOOLS THINK¹

The Illinois Association of Teachers of English, at its meeting a year ago this month, appointed a committee to ask the graduates of the high schools whether the training in English composition which they had received had proved satisfactory later. Similar committees were appointed by the associations of the city of New York and the states of Indiana and Kansas. The National Council committee upon this matter consists chiefly of the chairmen of the local bodies, and is designed to serve as a clearing-house for the results obtained.

All four sets of investigators made use of three questions practically identical. The first asked what parts of the high-school course had proved most useful in later activities; the second, what parts had been of least use; and the third, what had been left out or given insufficient attention which would have been helpful. The explanations accompanying the questions varied from a short note naming ten divisions of the course in New York to an elaborate list of thirty-eight items against which the graduate was to write "1," "2," or "3" in Illinois. In New York, some questions upon the literature were added.

New York replies numbered 290, 71 being from persons employed. Illinois furnished 240 answers, 125 coming through the high-school authorities, supposedly from workers. Indiana reports about 70 papers, which the committee did not think enough to warrant a tabulation, but did think sufficiently significant to warrant their association in continuing the work another year. Kansas, getting started late in the spring because their organization was just being formed, obtained 40 answers.

Unfortunately, because of the difference in the categories used by these different groups, it is practically impossible to present the statistics in a simple table. We shall have to be contented with a brief statement of the conclusions which are justified by all the reports.

All agree that the grammar taught has been useful, and that it should be given more time. In New York, a direct question whether

¹ Report of a committee of the National Council of Teachers of English, presented November 29, 1912.

the amount of grammar should be increased was answered in the affirmative, 175 to 43. In Illinois, grammar was most frequently mentioned as useful, and ranked near the top among the things to be given more emphasis. In Kansas, it appeared at first to have made a bad showing, but closer scrutiny disclosed that grammar as a whole did not appear upon their blank and that the cool reception was accorded to its subdivisions, sentence analysis, and study of the parts of speech, which in Illinois had failed of approval even when the subject as a whole was emphatically approved. This is explained by the not infrequent comment that grammar should be made more vital, should deal less with theory and more with practice. Too many of us are giving thorough drill in textbook grammar which yet does not connect with the pupil's own composition enough for him to know why he should not say "between you and I"—or even to know that he should not say it. We do not need to go more deeply into the niceties of our complex language, but to see that the children know how to use the theory they have.

Both Kansas and Illinois accord the highest—or all but the highest—place to spelling and punctuation. Strangely, the New York explanation did not mention either, and it did not occur to anyone to mention spelling while it occurred to only four to ask for more drill in punctuation. Perhaps the regents' system makes the elementary schools take care of the spelling.

The young people in Illinois laid great stress upon word-study as something which had been valuable but of which they did not have enough. It was not mentioned by the New York committee, but fifteen added it in answer to the third question, things to be emphasized. In Kansas the word diction was used on the blank and may have suggested nice discrimination in the use of words—not at all what word-study meant to those in Illinois—but even then it stands in the first third in popularity.

In all three groups, the items of theme, paragraph, and sentence structure were put forward for approval. The importance attached to structure of any kind varied somewhat in the different parts of the country, but sentence structure invariably led the others.

Letter-writing was recommended for more attention by thirty-four in New York, by more than any other item except oral composition—and it had not been mentioned by the committee, either. In Illinois, letters rank fifth in a list of thirty-eight parts of the course; in Kansas sixth among twenty-five.

Grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, drill in correct

use of words, and letter-writing! It sounds like a syllabus for business English. Matters of form, these are, almost mechanical in their nature, not to be taught as we teach history, but drilled upon until they become habits. The college student and the clerk agree that these are most important; can we doubt the validity of the verdict? We may have a beautiful theory that our courses should teach our children to think clearly, that they should be a means of real soul-growth through the quickening of the imagination, but we must not lose sight of the fundamentals, which have to do with the bread and butter. We must lay sentiment aside, and first of all secure reasonable correctness of form. It may make wooden writers, as we are so often told it will; it may even spoil a genius or two—if that can be done—but such drill the majority must have if they are to be fairly equipped for the work they will have to do. A wooden letter is in most instances better than an incorrect one. It does not make much difference, so far as these answers show, what the subject-matter is, so long as the form is mastered. Perhaps the shortest way to these results is the apparently longer way of stirring up a desire to talk or to write, but the teacher must always keep in mind that the *purpose* of the whole is this mastery of form, and that by his success or failure in that, the worth of his teaching is to be judged. Nor must he forget that the work is to be done as early in the course as possible, for the half of the students who will never enter the third year are the ones to whom form is comparatively most important. To get rid of the youngster's inhibition is good; to warm his imagination, and to train him to see the beautiful and picturesque in everyday life is good; but it is *necessary* for him to be able to speak grammatically, to spell, and to punctuate.

To speak grammatically! That is the hardest of all things for the students to learn, perhaps the thing that while they are in school they think least necessary, but the thing which as graduates they are most anxious to be able to do. In New York, oral composition was named as useful at least 50 per cent oftener than any other item, and was recommended for emphasis more than four times as often as letter-writing, its nearest competitor. In both Illinois and Kansas, it leads all the rest in need of more emphasis. I do not need to argue the point before this assemblage, but I should like to call attention to the fact that this is again a bread-and-butter, rather than a literary or cultural, matter.

So much for what has proved useful. Now let us see the useless lumber. In subject-matter, the graduates complain of long themes, brief-making, topical analysis, and argumentation. The only compari-

son of long and short themes was made in Illinois, where the employed graduates showed a decisive majority against the long theme and the college people supported it half-heartedly. The fact that in the same state argumentation ran far behind the other types of discourse was probably due, not to the lack of need to argue in the daily lives of ordinary persons, but to the teaching of argumentation in long formal themes about subjects remote from life. Many in New York found argumentation useful—it ranks second in that regard—but almost as many found it useless—it ranks second in that regard. That this strong vote in condemnation is probably due to the same cause as in Illinois is indicated by an overwhelming rejection of brief-making, 93 to 28, and the evident unpopularity of topical analysis.

In method, disapproval falls upon the study of models, upon criticism by classmates, upon dictation and rewriting. Nowhere was the use of models popular, but in the normal schools in Illinois it suffered most severely. Criticism by classmates was mentioned in Kansas and Illinois and proved unpopular in both places in spite of normal-school approval. Rewriting was mentioned only by the Illinois committee, and was condemned by a majority vote. Notebooks, mentioned in Kansas only, got a hostile reception.

On the same blank, but separated from the questions we have been discussing, appeared a question whether we now have too much rhetoric or composition. In New York, they called it rhetoric, and the vote in favor of increase stood 182 to 19, with the advice to make it more practical by more application. In Illinois, the vote was 113 for more composition, 41 for the maintenance of the present amount, and 24 for increase in time devoted to literature. In Kansas, the decision was that composition should have more time, 27 to 9. Make all the allowance you will, discount the figures as those of a questionnaire, it yet is clear that the easier teaching of literature has absorbed more than its fair share of the English time. Not long ago a college man who had been visiting extensively in Illinois high schools told me that in thirty classes he had visited in the course of two weeks, he found 27 recitations in literature and but three in composition. There is every reason to believe that this is a fair indication of the practice in general. Those who are giving less than half the English time to composition ought to ponder this graduate opinion very carefully.

Such are the views of the graduates of many of our schools. Are the conclusions drawn from them a valid guide for future practice? In the first place, the figures have been submitted to a considerable number

of persons, and all agree that praise and censure have fallen as I have here reported. There remain two possible sources of error. Possibly the graduates do not know what has helped them most, and have answered according to their prejudices and preferences. Even then the results would have some value, but I feel that this is not true except to a limited extent in matters of method. In matters of content, it is logical to admit that these young people have intelligence enough to know what they have found useful and what they have not. The last possibility of error lies in the comparatively small number of replies received. The best test of the validity of statistics is to divide them into smaller groups and compare the conclusions from each group with those from the whole. In this case, this test has been applied with very gratifying results. You have already seen that the results from the three states, widely separated as they are, with really different conditions of teaching, are in substantial agreement. In Illinois we tabulated the returns received directly through the high schools, those from normal-school students, those from university students separately, and found that in every important detail the various groups corroborated each other. Further investigation might disclose facts upon which this one sheds no light, even clear up some of the uncertainties of this one, but it is extremely unlikely that the positive conclusions here stated would be overturned.

We have found nothing really new, but only that the fads and frills, the attempts to be literary, and certain drudgery gone through in the attempt to do work of college thoroughness and extent, should give way to simpler composition in which the teacher has always in mind the mastery of form.

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THE TRAINING OF THE ENGLISH TEACHER—ONE EXPERIENCE

Is it possible that our teaching of English is a partial failure because of the kind of specialization that sometimes prevails in graduate courses? The question is perhaps suggested by a personal experience. I am an "accidental" teacher of English, having never been set apart for this high calling by the laying-on of hands of any English specialist.

In my early home were few books, but a great love for those few. The less said of my college English, the better. Indeed there was very little to say anything about. As a high-school assistant I once attempted